

CHAPTER 2.

ENGLAND - FRANCE - ARMENTIERES.

Of our life at Lark Hill Salisbury Plains, much might be written. We, undoubtedly, were knocked into shape as a Brigade on that cheerless place. We obtained our horses while there, horses which some of the fellows were destined to look after, and alternately curse and love during the whole progress of the war. The gunners received special instruction in gun laying and for open warfare; the drivers were taught the dexterous use of brush and currycomb, and the exact tone in which to pitch the accompanying and usual grooming whistle; the battery staff learnt the many parts of their job, and each battery learnt to work in unison like the combination of a good football team, and in a similar manner the Brigade learnt to work together.

During the time we were in England, Lt. Colonel Pearce was replaced by Lt. Colonel Spencer, and later he was replaced by Lt. Colonel Macartney. The latter officer took the Brigade to France and remained in charge of it through a long period of its operations. But in passing, it is necessary to interpolate a word about Lt. Colonel Pearce. This officer was in charge of "The Warren" camp when the Brigade was formed, and exercised such caution in the selection of the personnel of the Brigade. He encouraged us to take an interest in our tasks, and used the motto which the "Yandoo" so worthily and constantly maintained, "Esprit de Corps." One cannot forget him in such a record as this, because he really picked the personnel of the Brigade. Although Colonel Pearce left the Brigade in England, through the disability of age, he has always preserved a tremendously keen interest in its welfare and the boys, and now that the Brigade has been disbanded he is shewing a marked interest in the reunions.

At Lark Hill we had our first acquaintance with mud and snow and ice, an acquaintance that was destined to grow into close intimacy in France.

Many memorable incidents occurred during our training. The most memorable being the periods of leave and our first journeys to London and the provinces.

As a wartime measure the daylight saving act was in vogue and this combined with the English Twilight, made the day exceedingly long, football was first favourite and many a match was played on the hill adjacent to camp 17.

The Brigade's Cymkhana took place in October and every event was keenly contested.

At the end of 1916 we left England for the Front. Entraining at Amesbury, went to Southampton, and there embarked for Le Haure. At Le Haure we again entrained and journeyed through days and nights to Bailleul. Alighting at Bailleul we hitched horses to the limbers, formed up into column and marched to Strazeelle where the various batteries occupied "Billets" in barns with pigs and fowls for company, and the guns were perked in fields that were rapidly transformed into Bogs. Here it was that the batteries were reformed and made into six guns batteries, viz:- 25th, 26th, 27th and 107th. battery. The original 27th. was cut up and the even allotted to the other batteries, and a new 27th. battery was formed out of the disbanded 23rd. Brigade. While at Strazeelle we were introduced to "Vin Blanc, Vin Rouge, Bock and champagne, "oeufs," chips and other commodities dear to the digger's palate. Snow was lying everywhere; mud was deep, horses were continually bogging. Horse picket duties in those days were far different to the "larisez faire" methods observed at Lark Hill. The fellows were busy the whole night long digging out the horses which were bogging up to their planks. Chains became like so much frozen nettles, nosebags like so much mud.

The village saw us every night. We were, as always, prodigal of our cash and were accordingly popular with the village people. We learnt to know "Mamselle," and "Monsieur," Garcon and Madame, and we picked up our bits of French which never got much farther than "tout de suite," "sil vous plait" "Un franc," "beaucoup chips," "no bon," "Napoo" etc., but we knew also that we were nearing the Front. Armentieres was only a few kilometres away, and each night could see the flares going up illuminating the sky, and on calm days, see the observation balloons poised above the line steadily watching movements. Then often would hear fierce bursts of cannonading, telling us that the days of training were nearly over, that our time was nearly up. We had neared the Arena; our coats would soon be off, and we would hop into the ring, bearing before us the remembrance of Gallipoli and what our boys had done there, and acquit ourselves to the best of our abilities. They were eager days, days in which all were straining at the lashes, like so many dogs restrained from pursuing their quarry, but we did not have to strain long.

In those days, the early days of the New Year, (1917) Armentieres and the sector immediately before it was what the boys termed a "Home." It was, in point of fact, a species of training ground where the students of warfare were first afforded the opportunity of putting their theoretical knowledge, painfully acquired during many monotonous months, into practice.